

JUL 18 1965

Sanitized - Approved For Release : CIA

The 'Flap House' Setup For Meeting a Crisis

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At 9:30 one morning, the telephone rang at the bedside of Secretary of State Rusk.

The man who called was the watch officer in charge of the night shift at the State Department's Operation Center. He informed Rusk about a military revolt against Gen. Nguyen Khanh, then South Viet Nam's military commander.

The watch officer, who has to make the delicate decision whether to wake up Rusk, is the head of a five-man team which mans the center on the seventh floor of the State Department. Three such teams operate around the clock and one member of each is from the Pentagon, either a colonel or a lieutenant colonel.

"Speed is our Bible," said Lewis Hoffacker, director of the "Flap House," as the center is sometimes called. Others like to speak about the State Department's "Rumpus Room."

Set Up by Kennedy

After the Bay of Pigs disaster President Kennedy ordered this new instrument set up for use at a time of crisis. Since then, in Viet Nam, in the Congo, in Berlin and, more recently, in the Dominican Republic, the new facility has been put to good use.

Hoffacker himself is everything but secretive. The 32-year-old career diplomat established his fame as a consul in Elisabethville in the Congo in 1961, when he risked his life saving two U.N. observers attacked by secessionists.

The center, Hoffacker explains, serves a twofold purpose:

First, it keeps watch on emerging or potential crises.

Second, when a crisis develops, it assembles everyone in the administration working on the crisis situation, forming what is generally termed a "Task Force." The center shelters the group as long as the crisis lasts, feeds it with every bit of information on the situation, and protects its members from distractions.

Helps Policy Makers

The center is not a policy-making organ, but provides a well-oiled mechanism to help the policy makers particularly in situations when speed is of utmost importance.

Normally only important messages come to the center, but in a crisis, when a task force is quartered in the center, all messages related to the crisis are channelled to the force.

A "flash" message from an overseas post is simultaneously transmitted to the situation room of the White House, the military command center of the Pentagon, and the Central Intelligence Agency. Vice versa, whenever the Defense Department or the intelligence community receives an urgent message from its sources, that is automatically relayed to the operation center.

In addition to machines virtually flooding the center with decoded messages from abroad other machines provide Hoffacker and his staff with news reports.

Writes Daily Report

All this material is used by the center to write a top-secret summary which is on Rusk's desk early every morning. Every shift includes an editor, an official responsible for this summary.

There are three extra telephones on Hoffacker's desk: A white one, connecting him with the White House, a yellow one to the CIA, and a blue one to the Pentagon. In addition to these direct lines there are several "secure phones" in the center which "scramble" conversations.

There are also pneumatic tubes to Rusk's office and other important bureaus at the State Department to speed urgent messages.

In one room there is a screen on which incoming messages and replies can be projected. Rusk and undersecretary George W. Ball use this screen to "converse" with American envoys abroad, an especially convenient and secure way of conversation in crisis situations when the State Department is not satisfied with receiving messages but has questions to ask and expects immediate replies.

Form Task Force

In case of a real crisis which is expected to last longer than a few hours or days, everyone who has to deal with it moves to the center, bringing with him all the background material needed—and probably does not leave it before the crisis is over. These men form the task force.

The advantages are obvious, Hoffacker explains. All experts, selected usually from a number of offices, including agencies outside the State Department, are concentrated in one place, meaning:

- That they get the latest messages immediately and simultaneously.
- That they are together and can exchange views without having first to locate one another.
- That they are in a "secure" place, divorced from their regular duties, where nobody can bother them and where they can let their documents be strewn around on the desks, and
- Where they can concentrate on the main problem, without being disturbed by incoming telephone calls or visitors.

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